

# Closing The Achievement Gap: Challenges And Opportunities

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## INTRODUCTION

Closing the achievement gap between low-and high-achieving public school students is an important goal of public education (p. 42, Lowell Rose and Alec Gallup, Phi Delta Kappan, 2007). The paper will explore background information and research as well as discuss examples of best practices to close the achievement gap. Several plans have been proposed as ways to enhance the achievement of under-represented students, according to the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (Phi Delta Kappan, September 2007, p. 42), including additional instructional time, student assistance and increased assistance outside of the school day.

## DIVERSE LANGUAGE AND CULTURES

Pre-service and in-service teachers need to understand the language and cultures of the students they teach (Eller, 1991; Foster, 1991; Ratteray, 1991) as well as the socio-economic issues within the community. Baugh (1991) emphasized the importance of linguistic understanding and tolerance to help students speaking non-standard dialects. For example, in a fourth grade class in a public school in California, a teacher noted that she had children from 4 different cultures and each speaking a different language other than English.

In addition pre-service and in-service teachers need to understand the importance of focusing on learning rather than on teaching, that is, different learning styles and adapting instruction to individual needs (Eller, 1991). For example, teachers should be able to document the sources of their theories and base them on the “history, language, cultural traditions, and other aspects of the African and African-American heritage” (Rattery, 1991). According to the 2007 National Teacher of the Year, Andrea Peterson from Granite Fall, Washington, teachers should be concerned with relationships with students first and then focus on rigor and relevance of the curriculum. By figuring out what makes students “tick,” then the achievement will be remarkable. “Everybody can be great because anybody can serve” (Martin Luther King). Every student needs someone to stand up and recognize his/her special talents and take a personal interest in each learner.

Other important practices for teachers of diverse students include: (1) understanding and using cooperative and collaborative groups to allow student to learn from one another and in interactive activities regardless of linguistic or ethnic differences (Eller, 1991); (2) Knowing how to involve parents and community leaders in projects about the cultural heritage of represented groups; and (3) implementing multicultural activities in lessons and units. Examples of cities following the national trend with multicultural curricula in public schools include: Chicago, Atlanta, Buffalo, Minneapolis, New York, Portland, and Tulsa. These cities are designing and implementing guidelines, lessons plans and using other materials focusing on world cultures or ethnic contributions of under-represented groups. Using these materials help the students, teachers, parents and community leaders value the contributions of a diverse society. These students from different cultures need to see the options for achieving, different opportunities for careers and how to be efficient and success. Thus, schools need to form partnerships with families, businesses and communities to work together in order for under-represented student to achieve and plan for post-secondary education.

According to Andrea Peterson in her speech (Louisville, November 2007) to the participants attending the Kappa Delta Pi (Education Honorary Society) Convocation in Louisville, these educational partnerships are like an orchestra where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Each student is an important player in the orchestra of education and teachers should be focus on the relevance, rigor and responsibility of helping each learner achieve the goals and benchmarks.

## **GAINING EARLY AWARENESS AND READINESS OF UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS-A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM FOR UNDER-REPRESENTED STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

For example, GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness of Undergraduate Programs) is a federally funded program with partnership and state grants from the U.S. Office Of Education that focus on helping under-represented students and their families.

For the past nine years, The University of Tulsa has participated as one of 7 partners in the Tulsa Public Schools GEAR UP Project. In the first grant from 1999-2005 the project had approximately 1000 students in the cohort. Beginning with the seventh grade and following the cohort through high school, the project's primary goal was to help students improve their achievement, graduate from high school and plan for post-secondary education.

As a partner in the project, The University of Tulsa implemented the following activities to reach the goals:

1. Tutoring was implemented with the cohort in mathematics and reading at the school sites. Each academic five graduate students spent approximately 20 hours per week for 12 weeks at the GEAR UP schools. Undergraduates also spent 10 hours per week tutoring and helping the GEAR UP students. Based on the findings of the survey the tutoring helped students improve their academics. Data show that the middle and high school students were more comfortable with age-equivalent tutors, more willingness to ask for help, developed trust and bonding with the tutors and felt safer in the school environment.

Based on feedback from the GEAR UP students the data show that the project made a difference in the lives of students, including:

- Increase in school attendance because students receive help
- More students indicate an interest in preparing for college
- More questions were asked about college and post-secondary programs
- Participation in on-campus GEAR UP activities, such as summer academies, education and career seminars and workshops.

2. On-going Professional Development

A very important component of the Tulsa GEAR UP project was professional development for the faculty working with the under-represented students. In order to enhance student achievement, teachers need to have high expectations for the students and also use strategies that require the learner to be actively engaged. An excellent and effective professional development program, TESA (Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement) is a five-month staff development program where teachers practice the interactions in seminars and also with students in their classrooms. TESA has an excellent track record of 36 years and is a research-based program that includes studying 15 behaviors to encourage teachers to interact equitably with all students. The theoretical foundations of TESA is based on expectation theory from the early studies of teacher expectations conducted by Thomas Good and Jere Brophy (Looking in Classrooms, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, April 2007)

In a pilot GEAR UP staff development seminar during the spring of 2007, 12 middle school teachers from 5 schools met monthly to study the behaviors, role play and implement the behaviors in their content classrooms. Assessment of the TESA behaviors indicated that the teachers were more aware of their behaviors, especially higher expectations for all students and the realization that teacher can change their negative behaviors to positive behaviors for all students regardless of socio-economic levels, ethnicity, language differences, or achievement.

Other professional development seminars were implemented during the summer with follow-up sessions during the academic year. Positive feedback was received on the following:

1. Thinking Maps
2. Digital Storytelling

3. Foundations of Instructional Technology
4. Content Enhancement

The common element in the seminars/workshops listed above was the opportunity for the teachers to use the strategies in their classroom where all students were actively involved in constructing their own knowledge.

### **NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND**

For the past five years on the education news front No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has dominated (Phi Delta Kappan, Gerald Bracey, 2003). Barbara Day, President of Delta Kappa Gamma and past president of Kappa Delta Pi (November 2007) speaking on a panel discussion recently indicated that NCLB had good intentions and provided the following:

1. Increased accountability
2. More choices for parents and students, such as vouchers
3. Greater flexibility for states, school districts and schools

Priority for teaching reading for all students, especially in grades 1-3. Of course most educators and legislators would agree that we do not want to live in an illiterate society. Thus, our children are our future and for our democracy we need literate citizens that make wise choices. Further, Dr. Day commented that NCLB has not worked and the legislation is not doing what it is supposed to do for all students. As educators, we appreciate the intent of NCLB, the school boards, the administrators, but “highly qualified teachers” are necessary to have professionals that are licensed to design instruction based on the needs of all learners and implement instruction accordingly.

Bracy writing in the Phi Delta Kappan noted that all schools must test all students every year in grades 3 through 8 in reading and math, with the addition of science in 2006-07 (Bracey, October 2003, p. 149). Students in the schools must show adequate yearly progress (AYP). The AYP includes “all ethnic groups, all major socioeconomic groups; English-language learners, and special education students must make AYP separately. Ninety-five percent of each group must be tested and if any one group fails to make AYP, the school as a whole fails.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

Most educators would agree that accountability is important as long as we know who is responsible and which students we are referring. The late Dr. Jack Frymire noted that individuals should agree to be responsible for everything that he/she can control. The question that we should ask is whether each teacher is responsible for all students they are teaching. Dr. O.L. Davis (November 2007, Kappa Delta Pi) used the analogy of learning and fishing. For example, “fishermen go out to fish and frequently do not catch a fish, but the fishermen intended to fish. Students must make the decision to learn or not learn. The learner takes the hook!”

Dr. Andy Hargreaves (Kappa Delta Pi Convocation, November 2007) suggested that teachers of all learners need strong training in leadership to better understand teaching and learning. Other researchers suggest vouchers and charter schools as possible solutions to closing the achievement gap. The jury is still out as to the value of vouchers and their impact.

### **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER PROGRAM: CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

Charter schools are public schools that are operating outside the normal public schools and may be considered as an alternative to close the achievement gap. For example, the charter school in Tulsa, KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) is making a difference in the lives of about 450 minority students that needed a different school environment. Prior to enrollment, the parent (s) of each student is interviewed and signs a contract with the school administrator. Students attend KIPP from 7:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. and every other Saturday. Athletics

or after school extra curricula activities are not part of the KIPP' program. Teachers and counselors were carefully screened and are dedicated to the goals of KIPP, a national program. On the first day of school, the KIPP students visited a university campus and learned about college awareness and careers. Between classes the KIPP students read or work on assignments as they stand in line and wait to go to the next class. Classes are very well organized and structured to meet state and national standards.

## **TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

Teacher preparation programs should extend beyond generic pedagogical knowledge and universal theories to encompass content that will enable teacher candidates to provide equitable education for a cultural diverse and underserved population. As suggested by Eller (1998), teacher education programs should acquaint the teacher candidates with materials that focus on a wide variety of ethnic differences and learner needs. Undergraduate teacher education programs also should provide experiences in ethno-sensitive environments-acceptance of the language and greater tolerance for differences as well as the knowledge and skills to provide the best environment and instruction where all students can achieve.

Program changes for the teacher candidates have been implemented to meet national accreditation standards to ensure that future professionals are prepared to enhance the performance of culturally diverse and underserved populations. Effective teachers realize that they have the "power to mold, to nurture, to hold, to hug, to love, to cajole, to praise and yet criticize too, to point out pathways . . . to become a part of another person's well being" (Collins, 1991; Freedman, 1989). As pointed out earlier in the paper, teacher should focus on relationships-to care, to love and patiently keep polishing the corners of a child's or youth's mind until success is possible.

Teacher education programs and public schools have re-structured to meet the demands of today's learners. Teacher candidates take courses in the under-girding discipline of education, that is anthropology, sociology, psychology and multicultural studies. Many practicing educators have developed integrated, thematic units that meet national standards and provide opportunities for the learners to study the history and culture of the local community, the state, the nation in relationship to living in a global society. Early field experiences in teacher education programs have been redesigned to be developmental and continuous with opportunity to interact with learners in a variety of settings. Also methods courses for both elementary and secondary majors provide many opportunities to study the context of different school populations, experience assessing the needs of different learners, design, implement and reflect on instructional lessons and units prior to student teaching. During the senior year, the teacher candidates gain additional experiences in working with diverse populations with a semester/yearlong internship in diver settings.

In the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) Handbook of Research on Teacher Education, Carl A. Grant and Walter C. Secade (1991, p. 406) in the article on "Preparing Teachers for Diversity," write that linking teacher and student diversity could enable learners of diverse background to interact with teachers from all background. Diversity is good and learners for the future workforce need experiences with individuals from diverse background working in teams to solve the problems of a global society. According to Salinder (1990) prejudices should be recognized as a factor contributing to our inhumanity to others.

Further, Grant and Secada (1991) noted the discontinuity between the teaching force and the school population. The problem of attracting and retaining minority teachers has existed in the teaching profession for more than 20 years (Haberman, 1987). During the past five years 50 percent of all urban school students are from ethnic minority groups with the Hispanic group increasing. However, only 5 percent of all college students are from ethnic minorities. This small percentage represents the pool of minorities preparing for all professions, not just for the teaching profession. New methods of recruitment, preparation programs and additional funding for public schools are needed to attract a more represented constituency.

## CONCLUSIONS

Closing the achievement gap between low-and high-achieving public school students is an important goal of public education that has existed for many years in the United States. Many strategies have been implemented, including additional instructional time, student assistance and increased assistance outside of the school day. Additional strategies that may be making a difference include programs, such as, charter schools, especially Knowledge Is Power (KIPP) and GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness of Undergraduate Programs).

Communities, parents, and educators must form partnerships to continue our efforts in closing the low-and high achievers. Diversity or differences between situational and generational poverty; the challenges of rural and urban poverty, the hidden rules of socio-economic levels; and learning and behavioral problems of poverty level children and youth must be addressed by the partnerships (Rube Payne). In times of great challenges, opportunities such as the closing of the achievement gap are imperative. A movement led by author and speaker, Jason Dorsey (2005, 2007) suggests that “we can all do something today to strengthen our school’s cultures.” Jonathan Kozol writes in *The Shame of the Nation* (2005, p. 317) that “as a nation, as a people . . . we don’t have any choice but to reject failure and defeat.” We must continue to move forward in our efforts to close the achievement gap.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Shirley N. Robards is the Coordinator of Field Services and Director of the TU GEAR UP Project. The GEAR UP activities at The University of Tulsa include: tutoring, professional development and a summer academy. She is an associate professor in the School of Education and teaches field-based courses in elementary reading and math methods. Dr. Robards is also a certified trainer for workshops in helping teachers focus on teacher expectations and student achievement. She has graduate degrees from Western Kentucky University and Indiana University. She is a past president of the Association of Teacher Educators and a former international vice president of Phi Delta Kappa.

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**NOTES**